

A CHRISTMAS EVE GUEST

Aunt Jean, arrayed in her finest lace cap and an immaculate white apron, was in a low rocker before the dining room fire in her own home. She sat bolt upright, in spite of her sixty-four years. Her fine face, although marked with lines of care, was still fresh to see. The table, at her right, was laid with a snowy cloth, and was gay with some of her best china. It was Christmas Eve. Egypt, the cat, was stretched out at length on the hearth purring in sleek content, regardless of the fact that it was just eleven o'clock at night.

'It doesn't seem right to take this cup of tea,' said the old lady to herself aloud, 'and I going to Communion at the early Mass. But, indeed, I'm not only lonesome to-night, but also strangely faint at heart, and the night is bitterly cold. The dear Lord will not mind if I take a hot drink before starting out.'

She might well feel melancholy. She was alone in the house, as her one maid Jennie, had left that day to spend the feast with relatives in the country. And she was alone in the world also; for her nearest kindred were all dead. Parents, brothers, sisters, husband, children,—all gone before. Well, no, not quite all. There was Deborah. Aunt Jean had been thinking of Deborah off and on all that evening. That was partly the reason why she was so sad.

Deborah Dalton was the orphan niece of Mrs Mary Regima Brady, who in her cheery old age was known to all her friends as 'Aunt Jean.' The girl had been adopted by her in her fifth year, shortly after the death of her mother, the young widow of Aunt Jean's only brother. Mr Brady was living at the time, and so were two of his children. After their death Mrs Brady poured out all her affection on Deborah. She worked for her and saved for her and planned for her. She sent her to an excellent school and gave her every accomplishment taught there. She expected to leave to her her own frugal competence, and hoped to see her safely settled in life.

And Deborah responded to this love. She was an impulsive creature, in whom the slightest kindness aroused a gush of tender feeling, and who was easily led through her emotions. She was devoted to her aunt, and said to her a thousand times, 'I intend to spend my days to the end with you.'

In her eighteenth year Deborah came home from the boarding school where she had received the finishing touches of her education. She was a pretty, plump, and vivacious young girl. She carried herself jauntily; and, dressed in the simplest gown, with a bright bit of ribbon in her hair, she looked like a princess. She was like a sunbeam in the quiet home.

Naturally, Deborah soon began to attract some notice in the parish, and two or three of its young men felt drawn to pay her attentions. But although charmed at the evidence of her own magnetism, and delighted with the courtesies shown to her, she kept her heart to herself.

'I don't intend to get married, aunt,' she said to that lady when the latter once questioned her on the prospects of a favoured suitor,—'at least not for ever and ever so many years to come. I'm engaged to you, you know, and that's enough for me.'

This reply gratified Aunt Jean, even while she knew that her affectionate niece would most likely sometime bestow her heart's best love elsewhere. And, indeed, that time came sooner than they expected. Only a few weeks after the above-mentioned conversation a stranger entered the orbit of their lives and led them both to misery. What need to say who he was? Enough to know that he came of a respectable family, that his acquaintance was properly made, that he was engaged in decent employment as a commercial traveller, and that he behaved with due decorum. From the moment that Deborah laid eyes on his tall figure and dark face she was fascinated. Her character was too light to resist the spell. Her emotional nature followed its surging impulses and considered the question of principles too late. Her intentions were perfect, but her feelings hurried her beyond them.

The stranger reciprocated her affection. It was for both of them a case of love at first sight. He promptly pressed his suit, but clandestinely; for he was not of her faith, and this he knew would be an objection; and, as he could readily suppose, her aunt would not let her grow fond of him without close inquiry into his antecedents and principles. What his arguments were and how he persuaded Deborah with them,

no one knew; but one evening, only a few months after he first met her, he hurried her before a minister, and had her with him at Niagara Falls before even her aunt had the slightest inkling of the marriage.

Poor Aunt Jean was wounded to the quick. Was this the end of all her pains? Was this the return for her years of care? However, sorrow was too familiar for her to let it fester in her heart. What really grieved her most was the sacrilege,—the fact that Deborah had not only married a man who was outside of the Church, but had also put herself out of it by going before a preacher for the ceremony.

The young girl wrote from the Falls a passionate entreaty for forgiveness, to which her aunt replied that as soon as the pardon of God had been obtained, her forgiveness would be granted. But the masterful husband would not permit his wife to make reparation for the scandal. Still worse, he would not allow her to practise her religion. Right at the start he laid down his law most emphatically: 'My wife shall not go near the priests nor shall any of them ever enter my door.'

It was a clouded honeymoon and a desolate home that had been left. The newly-married couple did not return to the bride's former place of residence. Instead, the groom got transferred to the agency in Chicago. Afterward he moved to Denver, and subsequently to San Francisco. There trace of him and his was lost. One rumour asserted that they had gone to Australia, while another was positive that they had migrated to South Africa.

On this Christmas Eve it was just twenty-three years and one month since the unhappy marriage, and in all that time no one of her own blood had seen Deborah; and no further word had come from her, except a hurried message sent on a postal-card from Omaha. It was without date or signature, but in the well-known handwriting. It said, 'If ever I come back to God, I'll come back to you!'

The words were burned into the memory of Aunt Jean. She had uttered them over and over a million times: 'If ever I come back to God, I'll come back to you!' She did not need the postal-card to remind her of them, although, somehow, she carefully treasured it in her prayer book.

That was the grief of Aunt Jean's life—the falling away of Deborah. Fast and prayer and almsdeed had been offered up by her for years for the return of her niece to the practice of religion. Continually she said, 'Dear God, let her not die in her sins!' And next to this in frequency was the ejaculation, 'Lord, when she comes back, if it be not against Thy will, grant me the comfort of knowing of her return!'

Aunt Jean was thinking of all this as she sat before the fire with the tea brewing beside her. All her best beloved were dead,—all but Deborah;—and she sighed as she said, 'Would to God that she, too, like my own darlings, had died in the innocence of her childhood!'

The clock ticked noisily at this and the wind without blew shrill.

'We're all alone, puss,' remarked the old lady, as she stroked the black coat of Egypt. 'If it wasn't for the giving of gifts to Jennie and the poor, for the midnight Mass, and for the little Christmas-tree that I trimmed this evening for Deborah's sake, because she loved it so, it wouldn't seem like Christmas at all for me.'

The cat looked at her as if he quite understood it all and sympathised with her in her distress.

'I've got a bright new ribbon for you, Egypt,' she went on,—'scarlet, you know; Deborah's favourite colour. But I won't tie it on your neck until to-morrow. However, so that you won't feel slighted I'll give you a saucer of milk now.'

She filled a saucer from the china pitcher and set it upon the shiny oilcloth before the fire. But Egypt was too comfortable to stir. He blinked at the milk sleepily once or twice; then his eyes closed in the rapture of his coziness, and he purred even harder than before.

Aunt Jean, smiling at his laziness, sat down again and poured out the smoking tea into her dainty cup.

'I must hurry,' she said, 'for it's getting on toward 12.'

She had still some time to spare, for the church was not far off. So she shut her eyes, like Egypt, to enjoy the warmth and comfort of the moment. She felt strongly inclined to give way to drowsiness. What was it that made her push the steaming cup away? What was it that urged her to take up her rosary and fall to saying a decade for the souls who were then in the agony of death? She was at the last bead when a stumbling step sounded on the icy walk without and a sharp knock struck the front door.